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Critical Thinking in Contemporary Art

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Exhibition Review: Judy Pfaff

Judy Pfaff was born in London, England in 1946. She attended Washington University where she received her BFA in 1971 and her MFA from Yale in 1973. Pfaff is mainly known for her installation art. She received numerous awards for her work. As a child, Pfaff and her brother were abandoned by both their mother and father leaving their grandparents to raise them. Pfaff used to play in bombed out and abandoned buildings, gathering raw materials for her fantasy buildings. At the age of 15 Pfaff left home and eventually got married years later, to an Air Force Officer. She attended 3 colleges. She created her first large scale installation piece, titled “J.A.S.O.N - J.A.S.O.N.” which was displayed at a nonprofit Artist Square in New York. This installation was made from plaster, sheet metal, lights, paint, wire, and wood.

Al Held, an expressionist painter, was significant influence on Pfaff’s artistic style; He taught at Yale while Pfaff was earning her MFA. Pfaff describes her installations as abstract narratives based on her personal experiences. Pfaff creates paintings, prints, sculptures, and installation art. Pfaff’s momenta installation “Apples and Oranges” is a 3-Dimensional, abstract version of still-life painting. The colorful discs and hemispheres, suggestive of fruit bowls, seem to explode off the wall in defiance of gravity and in wry reference to the spatial explorations of Paul Cézanne and the Cubists. Pffafs use of industrial materials, Day-Glo colors, and advertising signs reflects her interest in the vitality of everyday experiences in Pop Art. Date:1986; medium: plastic laminates, painted steel, and wood; Dimensions: 113x142x72 inches; Credit Line: Purchase with 20th Century Art Acquisition Fund on view at Wieland Pavilion, Skyway level, Gallery 412.

Pfaff synthesizes sculptures, paintings, and architecture into dynamic environments, where space expands and collapse between a two and three dimensional. Her installation pieces’ pierce through walls and sway through the air. Pfaff’s work is complexed of visual information composed of fiberglass, plaster, steel, and tree roots. She also has motifs in a series of prints from vegetation, maps, and medical illustrations.

I chose this exhibition because the colors caught my eye as soon as we entered the room. The installation really takes you back to the Pop Art era with all the bright vibrant colors. I stood in awe just indulging the beauty of something made from environmental elements. My mind wasn’t focused on whether it was saying something or making a statement. It also reminded me of a cartoon scene with the 3 dimensional pieces and the way the colors popped. The colors of this installation make it a happy piece, it made me think that art can be made from everything, that there is no limit to expressing yourself when do so. It also taught me that you don’t know what you can do with other things than the normal art materials if you don’t step out of your comfort zone. This was a very interesting installation to me because of the vibrant colors and what it was made up of. 

The exhibition space was in good use. It was railed off by small railing which was small enough to walk over but was placed to keep people from getting to close the installation. The installation was installed onto the wall in a professional manner. The absence of mats was appropriate, there was a small railing going along the installation to keep people from getting to close and accidently making it fall. The overall experience was great. Every time I go it’s always a good experience. The staff was very helpful with giving directions to certain exhibitions as well as answering questions about exhibits. The surrounding atmosphere always seems to get along with whatever exhibit is being showcased.

Judy Pfaff used formal elements such as shape, texture, line, color, as well as composition, many of her installations are colorful. Lines are a major part in many of her installations because they move the eye from one point to another. The texture is somewhat smooth on some pieces and ridge on the parts that were made of wood. In “Apples and Oranges” there is a lot of movement as well as positive and negative space. In this installation, the texture varies because there is more than one element used. Pfaff was very hands on with this installation. When you get an installation from her you will inherit her assistant Ryan, a crew, the dog, the noise, and the dirt. If you don’t want that you get prints and drawings. Her installation art has been compared to a collage in space. When you get into the works of these installations you begin to see how the elements hang together and develop on one another. She has always rejected preconceived form of art making.

Pfaff seemed to always have a passion for art from her childhood where she would play in old buildings collecting scraps or anything that she could create with. She puts life’s experiences into her work. “Apples and Oranges” is a very visible piece, but some people may not understand the meaning until they’ve read it; even though some art is misunderstood the time and effort people put into it is art. I didn’t understand what it was at first but the context and the composition was so appeasing that I didn’t want to read about it off hand. It puts me in the mind of overthinking and all your thoughts just explode.

Pfaff interest were based om Pop art as well as everyday experiences. Pop art is an art movement that emerged in the mid 1950’s in Britain and the late 1950’s in the United States. Pop arts aspects were of mass culture, such as advertising, comic books and mundane cultural objects. One of its aims is to use images of popular culture in art. Emphasizing on the elements of any culture most often through irony. It is also associated with the artists use of mechanical means of reproduction or rendering techniques. Pop art is interpreted widely as a reaction to abstract, due to the utilization of found objects and images its it like Dada. Pop art is a considered to be an art movement that precedes to postmodern art. Pop art often takes imagery that is currently in use in advertising.

In this installation, Pfaff was also referencing explorations of Paul Cézanne. Paul Cézanne was a French artist and Post-Impressionist painter whose work laid the foundations of transition from the 19-century conception of artistic endeavors to a new and different world of art in the 20th century. He developed a solidified and almost architectural style of painting. Throughout his life, he struggled to develop an authentic observation of what he saw in the world by the most accurate method in representing it in his paintings. 

He then perceived his paintings into simple forms and color planes. Cézanne was interested in simplification of naturally occurring forms to geometric essentials, he wanted to “treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone”; for example, an apple or orange can be a sphere. With that being said, Pfaff was inspired by Cézanne with a lot of her works.